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SUBJECT: SUPPORT DEEP IN IRAN FOR US TALKS, IN ONE VIEW
(C-NE7-00968)

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CLASSIFIED BY: Jillian L Burns, Director, Iran Regional Presence Office, Dubai, US Department of State.

REASON: 1.4 (d)

1.(S/NF) Summary. There is more support now in Iran for talks with the US than ever before, despite opposition from some pockets based on ideological and economic grounds, said an Iranian political scientist to IRPO Director May 24. The academic claimed that a "successful" US-Iran meeting would require a deliverable for the Iranian side in order to avoid attacks back home but was less clear on what Iran was prepared to deliver. The political scientist opined that agreement on the MEK or the Irbil 5 would be optimal but that a positive statement by the US government after the meeting would likely suffice. The academic said it is possible that the recent spat of arrests of Iranian-Americans may be an attempt from one camp to kill the talks. He predicted that Haleh Esfandiari would be released soon. He reasoned the government will not want to further provoke the Iranian elite, who hold her in high regard, an argument than sounds more hopeful than realistic. End Summary.

Upcoming US-Iran talks - Why now?

2.(S/NF) An Iranian political scientist discussed May 24 the upcoming US-Iran talks, the case of Halah Esfandiari, and internal political dynamics (latter subject to be reported septel) with IRPO Director. The academic opined that there is more support now in Iran than ever before for talking with the US. He indicated there was a wider realization within the government that only through the US can Iran resolve its security and economic issues. Talking to Europe will get it nowhere. Plus, the Iranian government has seen that US seriousness in its threat of a military strike - although it does not think the US would likely strike at the present time. It has also seen US resolve in confronting Iran in Iraq and forging an international coalition leading to UN Security Council resolutions. Iran would prefer to avoid a third resolution, he said, for the psychological impact it would have at home. In addition, he said, the Iranian government understands that its people want ties with the US and

international links. In particular, he said, the Iranian people see interaction with the US as the key to modernization. The academic claimed that the Iranian people as a whole are very pro-American and still believe that - unlike European countries - the US can resolve the problems in the region. Suspicions of both UK and Russian intentions still run high, he said. For instance, he claimed that Iran would never seize US soldiers like it did the British soldiers because the Iranian public will believe Brits were acting illegally but would be less likely to believe this of Americans.

3.(S/NF) As much as you can dislike President Ahmadi-Nejad's politics, said the professor, he presents a "new" opportunity for progress in bilateral relations because unlike his predecessor, Khatami, he is not afraid of anything. If he wants to do something, he will. No other president has written letters to a US president, for instance. Nonetheless, he said, there remain some in Iran opposed to talks with the US -- either for ideological grounds or because they profit economically from the status quo -- who may try to torpedo any new openings. He acknowledged this could be one motivation for the recent spat of arrests of Iranian-Americans, but also said that the government is truly afraid of efforts to orchestrate a velvet revolution there and seeks to intimidate its populace through arrests and crackdowns like the current one on bad hijab.

4.(S/NF) The academic opined that in order for the talks to continue and to succeed, the Iranians must leave the meeting with some kind of deliverable. Otherwise, hardliners opposed to talks will attack them for betraying national interests. He said there is great concern about a rerun of Afghanistan, in which Iranians believe their "complete" cooperation with the US on Afghanistan was rewarded by the Axis-of-Evil designation. The academic thought this was why there was no meeting between the Secretary and Foreign Minister Mottaki in Sharm el-Sheikh. He said politicians are frightened for the sake of their careers to go back to Tehran empty-handed.

5.(S/NF) When pressed by IRPoff to define what Iranians would

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call a deliverable, the academic said that an agreement on the Mujahhadin-e Khalq (MEK) or release of the so-called Irbil 5 would be optimal, but he realized that this may be too much to expect from a first meeting. He added that there is complete realism on the Iranian side that resolution to a major issue like the nuclear issue is not achievable from such a meeting. The political scientist said that a positive statement from the US government about the May 28 meeting after its conclusion - preferably from the highest level -- would likely suffice for a first meeting. He maintained that positive statements from the US on Iran get the largest number of hits on Iranian news websites, such as Baztab. He added that such a statement could also touch on other areas, such as a restatement that the US wanted to resolve the nuclear issue diplomatically, even though the talks were focused solely on Iraq.

6.(S//NF) Asked whether the Iranian government continues to view the MEK is a real threat, he answered not in its current state but it could be if it got a new foreign backer. He repeated what all of our contacts say - that the MEK are seen as traitors in Iran for their cooperation with Iraq during the Iran-Iraq war. On the Irbil 5, the academic said the fact that their families had been given permission to see the detainees had been viewed positively in Iran as an indication that the US was looking to resolve this issue. When asked, he said the Iranian people see the detainees as an important issue and would be happy to see it resolved.

7.(S/NF) When asked what kind of deliverable Iran could give the US in talks, the academic was vaguer. He said that the sight of the US and Iran working together could help Iraqi PM Maliki enforce greater security in Iraq and that Iran could use its influence with Shia groups. He maintained that Iran's primary goal in Iraq was national security, not religious interests. Above all, he said, Iran wanted to ensure that future Iraqi

governments will not threaten Iran as Saddam Hussein's government had. When asked how to address Arab concerns about a US-Iran meeting on Iraq, he essentially said that Arab countries should come to grips with reality. He maintained that Iran is not a threat to the region but that at the same time, as long as there is instability in the Middle East, Iran will see an opportunity for itself to play a role. The way to preempt Iran, indicated the academic, was for the US and Arabs to work to resolve the conflicts.

8.(S/NF) The political scientist called on the US not to lose the support of the Iranian people. He repeated what we hear from many - though not all - contacts. He maintained that the Iranian people remain largely pro-US, but that a US attack would cause the Iranian people to turn against the US and rally around their government. He maintained that Iranians are just trying to make the best of their situation and that they have no taste for upheaval, either brought about by external or internal forces.

9.(S/NF) Comment: The academic, who knows Haleh Esfandiari, said he believed she would be released soon. He said that, compared to Ramin Jahanbegloo, Esfandiari has much closer ties to Iranian academics and their deep respect. He reasoned that the Iranian government would not want to risk the anger from the Iranian elite that holding her for very long would engender. This view seems somewhat naove, given that the government never had the support of the Iranian elite and it seems unlikely it would care about alienating them further, but we hope his prediction comes true.

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